

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES A STUDY OF 16-18 YEAR OLDS' PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

FROM
THE CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF
PUBLIC RELATIONS
DIVERSITY WORKING GROUP
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CIPR

Future perspectives

A study of 16-18 year olds' perceptions of public relations

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Methodology

As part of ComRes's role as the CIPR's polling partner, ComRes interviewed 1,229 students in the United Kingdom online from 2 to 20 November 2012. In total, 289 interviews were conducted with students who are from a black or ethnic minority background (BME).

Data were weighted to be representative of all UK young people aged 16-18 by age, gender, region and ethnicity. ComRes is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.

The full data set for this research is available via the ComRes website at www.comres.co.uk.



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Introduction



**Cornelius Alexander FCIPR,
Chair of CIPR Diversity
Working Group**

“The good news is that the opportunity to increase diversity within public relations exists. Students aged 16-18 from a BME background are actually all around more positive about a career in public relations than their peers.”

Why is there under-representation in public relations from the BME community? After three years of building relationships, engaging with fellow practitioners and students, developing toolkits, getting the CIPR to commit to tackling diversity through ‘The Asks’, and holding recruiters to account, that is the one question that still vexes the public relations profession.

This report looks at different parts of that question and has revealed that many young adults from many different backgrounds simply do not know enough about our profession to decide that they want to join us.

Young adults in education are reluctant to choose public relations as a career because they are unfamiliar with what it involves and they do not know what they, as a future professional, could gain from the industry. It is up to us within the sector, to do a better job of ensuring that students, parents, teachers and others have a better understanding of what we do.

The good news is that the opportunity to increase diversity within public relations exists. Students aged 16-18 from a BME background are just as positive about a career in public relations as their non-BME peers. The industry must now ask itself serious questions as to why these students are not breaking through and why the BME community is so

under-represented in employment.

Diversity is not just represented in race and ethnicity; region, gender and socio-economic status are all factors that could affect a student’s career choices. Students from outside of London and from a lower socio-economic background are more likely to be very unfamiliar with public relations. Yet these students could be some of the most talented, astute and hard working future employees of the next decade.

We must work hard to ensure that young adults, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status or region have the understanding and the opportunity to enter into the public relations profession. Providing these students with information, resources and knowledge to make an informed career choice is a challenge that the CIPR should look to embrace, and we look forward to working hard on this over the next year and beyond.

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31%

of the BME student sample is familiar with PR as a career, compared to 30% of the general population.

“BME students are as positive in their view of public relations as a profession as their peers, with slightly more of them considering it as their future career than compared to the total student population surveyed.”

This survey was conducted in order to focus on the issues that impact the career decisions of 16-18 year old full-time and part-time students, with relation to the public relations profession.

Within this report, there is a particular emphasis on diversity, in particular how decisions or opinions of public relations may differ for students from an ethnic minority background. The intention of this focus is to better understand what may lead to the under-representation of BME individuals within the public relations industry.

Familiarity of the public relations profession is low
An overwhelming majority of students questioned in the survey are unfamiliar with what a career in public relations involves. 70% of all students said that they were unfamiliar with what a career in PR involves, far higher than those who said they were unfamiliar with other professions such as medicine (39%), sales (42%), and banking and finance (53%). However, the relative size of the PR profession must be taken into consideration here, when compared to industries which are much larger such as

sales, banking and finance.

Students had an improved idea of what public relations involved when they were presented with possible answers to select from. 39% of all students thought that ‘management of relationships with the public’ was the phrase that best represented what public relations professionals spend most of their time on. However, 20% answered that they didn’t know what professionals spent their time on, and one in ten thought the answer was ‘celebrity public image management (9%).’

Consideration of public relations as a career is low amongst students

A majority of students stated that they were unfamiliar with what a career in PR would involve. Only 7% of students are considering a career in PR; students are choosing instead to look at careers they are more familiar with such as

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medicine (16%), or banking and finance (14%).

Compared to just 7% of the control group, 9% of BME students are considering a career in public relations. Yet perhaps one of the issues preventing students from a BME background from entering the public relations profession remains their indicated preference to enter established, well-respected professions (37%) such as science, medicine, banking and law.

Despite the small differential number in the proportion considering PR, this is a positive indication that diversity within the sector can be improved. Importantly though, it does highlight the fact that somewhere between considering a career and entering employment there is a disparity that must be addressed.

Parents have the greatest influence on a student's career choice

The greatest influence on students' career decisions is their family. 73% of respondents said that their family would have either a great deal or fair amount of influence on their career decisions, much higher than

other potential influencers including friends (40%), teachers (56%) and the media (39%).

BME students (80%) are more likely to be influenced by their family with regard to their career decisions, compared to 72% of the sample population.

BME students are more positive about a career in public relations than their peers

BME students take a positive view of public relations as a profession, with slightly more of them considering it as their future career than compared to the total student population surveyed. BME students also indicated similar levels of familiarity of the profession, with 70% of non-BME students indicating they were unfamiliar with what a career in public relations involves, compared with 69% of the BME sample saying that they were unfamiliar with the profession.

BME students are also more likely to perceive a career in public relations favourably. BME students are more likely to say that a career in PR would mean enjoying the work that they do (34% compared with 26% among non-BME students), which is important because this was the most popular response

quoted by BME students when asked what they most wanted from a future career (69%). BME students were also more likely to say that working in PR would help them 'earn a good salary in the future'. (22% compared with 18% among non BME students) and allow them to work with talented and skills professionals (20% compared with 18% among non-BME students).

BME students, who are more likely to be influenced in their career choice by their parents than other students, indicated that they were more likely to have a positive reaction from influencers, including family, friends and teachers, should they speak to them about a future career in public relations.

Baseline positive perceptions amongst the BME student population are relatively strong. In order to support and sustain such positive sentiments, students will need to have access to information and advice that can further guide any perception they may have of the public relations industry.

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The research suggests that more informed students tend to be more positive about public relations across a number of categories, perhaps because they will know what they can expect from the career and can therefore make the more informed career choice to enter the profession.

Other findings of note

A greater proportion of male students (34%) than female students (27%) said that they were familiar with what a career in PR involves, yet this is not reflected in their willingness to enter the profession. Of those who indicated they were considering PR as a career 61% of these were girls and 39% were boys.

Social grade and region can also greatly affect a student's perception of a career in PR. Across the regions consideration of entering PR as a career was low.

Similar differences can be seen across students from different social grades. Students were asked which best described the level of employment of the highest income earner in the household, and this was used to indicate social grade ABC1 or

C2DE. Students classed with social grade C2DE are far slightly less likely to consider PR as a profession (6%) than those with social grade ABC1 (7%). Students from a lower social grade are also far more likely to be very unfamiliar with public relations careers involve (33% vs. 23% among ABC1s).

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Recommendations and actions

In order to effectively address the findings of this report, the CIPR Diversity Working Group (DWG) has proposed the following recommendations and actions which aim to provide students with the information, resources and knowledge that they need to make an informed decision about pursuing a career in public relations.

As the research indicates that there is interest in a career in PR amongst BME students, we must look into ways to make the profession more attractive to BME students.

Action:

The CIPR and DWG will work hard to highlight diversity within the public relations sector, ensuring that students see professionals as role models from a range of backgrounds, particularly BME practitioners. This will be done through sharing of stories and images via such initiatives as the CIPR's 'Meet the Members' campaign and career case studies via the CIPR website.

The CIPR and DWG will also produce a series of careers resources, which will include information and advice for students, ensuring that BME students are informed of why the public relations profession is an attractive career choice.

The industry must investigate why the attrition rate is so much higher among BME students when BME students and the greater student populace have similar interest levels when it comes to entering PR as a career.

Action:

The CIPR and DWG will continue with their commitment to encourage employers to seek to increase diversity by employing individuals based on merit and being aware of issues of unconscious bias where they may exist.

Similarly, the CIPR and DWG will work to ensure that BME students aged 16-18 and older, who have expressed any desired interest to enter the profession, have the relevant advice, support and information they need to make an informed decision about their career. Strategies to achieve this include both the development of a student career pack, and the provision of free CIPR membership to all university students registered on a CIPR recognised degree course.

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To increase the number of students entering the public relations profession the message must reach influencers, particularly their families. The CIPR must recognise that family is of great importance and resources must be available for all stakeholders, not just students.

Action:

The CIPR will continue to work to ensure that the correct meaning and perception of public relations is shared publicly through media outlets. This will help parents and other influencers better understand that public relations is a professional, strategic and vital profession that offers the opportunity for a successful and rewarding career.

To increase the number of students who would consider entering the public relations industry, the CIPR must first work to increase their understanding of the profession. We will engage with careers advisors to increase their awareness of the profession and will produce materials which support this work.

Action:

The CIPR and DWG will work with a number of schools, colleges and universities to organise careers days and careers fairs, increasing the opportunity for students to gain greater awareness and understanding of the public relations profession from people who work within the industry.

The CIPR should ensure that employers are made fully aware that there is an engaged, interested and positive population of young students out there who are willing to consider entering the profession. What is more, many of those students are from diverse backgrounds and the onus should be on employers to reach out to those who are both talented and willing to enter the profession.

Action:

The CIPR and DWG will continue to work with employers to promote diversity within the industry.

Initiatives such as the CIPR's Equal Access Network events are already in existence and will continue to run in support of this endeavour.

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The CIPR cannot overlook how social grade and region can affect a student's perception of a career in PR. Any efforts aimed at increasing understanding of PR must be rolled out across the UK. The CIPR must ensure that students from lower social economic backgrounds can gain access to information about public relations as understanding will increase willingness to enter the profession.

Action:

The CIPR will liaise with its regional member groups to visit local educational institutions regionally to share information about the public relations profession. This will also ensure that those from lower socio-economic backgrounds are receiving information in their educational environment or via the Internet.

We must have the support of local CIPR Groups to ensure that this campaign is established beyond London and the Home Counties.

Action:

The CIPR and DWG will liaise with its regional member groups to ensure that regional committees and members are aware and involved with all regional initiatives undertaken, including a presence in schools, colleges and universities.

To underpin this work and in order to reach out to other groups who are under-represented the CIPR must develop an awareness campaign targeting the next generation of potential practitioners.

Action:

The careers pack produced by the CIPR and DWG will ensure that young adults who may be the next generation of potential practitioners are receiving the information and advice necessary for them to make an informed career decision to enter the public relations profession.

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